Part II
Confronting Change

8 Caste, Politics, Religion, and Region *vs.* Journalistic Profession

A Crisis of Deference in Indian Journalism

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Introduction

India's fast-changing political environment directly impacts the media and its ownership, while indirectly affecting coverage of events and competition among media outlets. This chapter traces how political and economic developments have drastically altered the Indian mediascape, including how media ownerships operate in the context of contemporary political developments. The study further explores how these ownerships have transformed themselves into monopoly capitalism (Smythe, 1981) and how Indian journalism became replete with clichés about caste, religion, and region. Together, the liberalization of the economy and manipulation of society's value system and customs by political parties (national), family-controlled parties/governments (regional), and caste- or religious classes have reworked professional conduct and ethics for journalists. One result is that journalists' primary job now is to appease media owners and their political affiliates, which is evident from how journalists resort to a vocabulary that balances sensationalism, consumerism, and objectivity.

Reporting in India has been intriguing and complex since pre-independence. It is intertwined not only with the past struggle for freedom, but also with economic and development policies of post-independence governments. India is the world's largest democratic country, and its population represents a vast diversity of regions, religions, castes, and lifestyles. Scholars have made it a frequent subject of critical study (Datta-Ray, 2000; Murthy, 2010a, 2010b; Murthy et al., 2010; Ninan & Chattarji, 2013; Ram, 2001; Rangaswami, 2001).

Datta-Ray (2000), Ram (2001), and Murthy (2010a, 2010b) have examined the character and dissemination of media content *vis-a-vis* contemporary political settings, dividing media history into freedom struggle and postindependence periods. They found that "bias and profit-oriented reporting" were salient features during both eras in that pro-British and pro-Congress media each exhibited "bias and market orientation." Datta-Ray (2000) outlined efforts of the central and regional

governments to curb press freedom and heavily emphasized the media's role during the 21-month state of emergency (1975–1977) imposed by then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. During the emergency, Gandhi assumed unbridled authority to rule by decree, suspended the fundamental rights of citizens, and imprisoned political opponents under the guise of containing internal disturbances and threats to national security.

Murthy (2010a) outlined how the mediascape has expressed itself in emerging contemporary political contours and the market economy from pre-independence to the era of globalization. That research established the media's rapidly changing preferences, ranging from constructivist to adversarial approaches through spin-doctoring. During the freedom struggle and post-independence before the dawn of liberalization in the 1990s, the media's role was dictated chiefly by media ownerships (not monopolies) tinged with political ideologies of nationalism and patriotism (Murthy, 2010a). There were no monopolies except All India Radio and Doordarshan working under the aegis of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting during this time.

However, the media's market orientation, coupled with ardent political loyalty, became a phenomenon after the 1980s when the *Times of India*, the nation's leader in circulation and online views, dramatically changed its editorial policies by inserting an advertisement for *Rasna* (a soft drink) in the space provided for editorials. This was considered the beginning of the downfall of editorial freedom in the era of privatization. Adopting Randal's (1998, 2003) methodology of examining the characteristics of market-driven journalism, Murthy et al. (2010) studied the front-page priorities of four prominent English-language dailies. The study found a 360° turnaround by the media from its earlier ethics and values of front-page reporting between the pre-globalized and post-privatization era. That was concomitant with the ushering in of a neoliberal economy. With an eye on the markets, print media expanded their circulation to interior India by publishing regional editions catering to rural residents (Ninan, 2007). Both Datta-Ray (2000) and Ninan (2007) considered this spread of media to the grassroots level as reflecting growing participation in local governance, which simultaneously strengthens democracy.

Ninan (2003) asserted that casteism (everyone born in India is deemed to be born in a caste, be it an upper or lower caste) entered politics in a big way after the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report in the 1990s. That report was meant to empower economically and socially underprivileged Other Backward Classes (OBCs) by offering greater access to educational institutions and government employment. However, its implementation aroused hatred between upper and lower castes, with hundreds of students of upper castes committing suicide as an act of protest against the report. Ninan opined that this affected media-vs-government relationships as well. The entry of casteism into

the journalism profession, argued Ninan, virtually split journalists along caste lines. Since then, casteism has gone full circle. Initially journalists' casteist pursuits were limited to combating injustice against underprivileged groups. Later this trend transformed into pitting underprivileged classes and Scheduled Castes or Tribes against one another rather than against upper and privileged castes. Casteist angles and views expressed in the media have slanted the actual happenings, with each caste group justifying the wrong done by its own group to another. Truth was a casualty of these actions as objectivity in reporting vanished. The credibility of sources' statements was judged by people's caste, not by facts (Murthy, 2008b).

Something similar happened with the appearance of regionalism in news coverage. Regional youth began donning the roles of reporters and media spin-doctors, dominating the reporting of region-specific content for native media houses in Hyderabad, the capital of the then-combined state of Andhra Pradesh.[1] Without that movement, carving out the new state of Telangana from the then-combined state of Andhra Pradesh in 2014 would not have become a reality (Sridhar, 2009). Andhra Pradesh witnessed a shrill crescendo of regional rhetoric in the media characterized by platitudes, unsubstantiated allegations against the governance of combined Andhra Pradesh, and emotional hate-filled speeches by regional leaders. Such media sensationalization of regional struggles prodded innocent students at Osmania University to commit self-immolation or suicide to signal their unbridled support for the separation of the state of Telangana from Andhra Pradesh. This kind of sensationalization of "hate-speeches," "fake news," and "false allegations" as a market strategy yielded media owners massive profits in the form of peaking Television Rating Points and high advertising revenue (Sridhar, 2009). Though there are divergent views on the role played by the media during this regional strife (Shaw, 2014; Sridhar, 2009), consensus was reached on its "controversial" nature.

Rapid changes in market strategies implemented to keep pace with globalization required media houses to swiftly expand and diversify by establishing additional media firms such as radio, television, mobile, and internet services (digital networks). This led most media houses to transform into monopolistic ownership by the 1990s. The emergent ownership patterns are typically seen as a function of the monopoly capitalism that defined most of the 20th century worldwide (McChesney, 1999; McChesney & Foster, 2003; Smythe, 1981). This led to drastic changes in journalists' working conditions as media houses demarcated regional perspectives in contrast with their earlier national perspectives. It also coincided with the burgeoning of regional political entities such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttara Pradesh and the Telangana Rashstra Samithi (TRS) and Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh. The working conditions of journalists—their customs, values,

and ethics—faced new challenges with the accentuation of identity politics associated with political, regional, caste, and religious contours. The academic prescription of journalism ethics and professional practices were at cross-purposes.

Statement of the Problem

Graham's 2006 seminal work analyzed the political economy of communication through five thematic areas: ownership; monopoly; audiences; access; and democracy. This study considered three of these themes—ownership, monopoly, and democracy—due to certain cultural similarities between Indian and Western media. It excluded themes of access and audiences because of extreme cultural differences. The four chosen variables—caste, region, religion, and politics—are by and large cultural, overlapping, and unique to India. They vary from state to state. Such media orientations are rarely found in the West, and Western media scholars do not comprehend how they operate in Indian media and culture.

Method

Murthy (2010a, 2016) documented that Western media practices and/or coverage and Western social theories do not directly influence Indian media. He attributed the irrelevance and lack of comparability between Western media theories and Indian media content to the fragmentation of media content along lines of caste, region, religion, and politics (Murthy, 2016). He further observed that Indian media content and/or reporting are linked to unique market strategies arising from Third World market factors described as a "butterfly metamorphosis." Graham quoted McChesney (1999), who argues that any inquiry into how media ownership in monopoly capitalism inhibits citizens' capacity to attain a genuinely egalitarian participatory democracy must include studies of how system-wide propaganda favoring the system is maintained.

Thus, this study examines how caste, region, religion, and politics affect journalists' working conditions and professional ethics. It also investigates how these factors have done so despite the media freeing itself from the government's regulatory mechanism during the post-globalization/liberalization era.

Findings

Ownerships vs. Regional Identity Politics

Ownership-related politics have played a critical role in Indian media history. Ownership structures can be categorized in many ways, such as national or regional, secular or religious, and casteist or non-casteist.

But most categories are invariably linked with identity politics. Distinct features isolate national media from regional, secular media from religious, casteist media from non-casteist. Differences in political ideologies notwithstanding, many media owners express difficulties in reporting objectively due to commercial survival concerns. This was the first-ever indication that Indian media preferred to depart from objective and value-based reporting (Bhattacharjea, 2000, p. 69). Describing this situation as grim and unbecoming, Rangaswami (2001) pointed out how some media fanned communal passions and hatred through scurrilous writing (p. 167).

All ownerships appear politically biased. By looking at print or television coverage by conglomerate-owned outlets, one can discern its political ideology. In addition, every party has its own media management cell that operates 24/7. Each political organization has its own media managers and spin doctors who determine the content of soft and hard news on television channels and digital media versions. In effect, owners' political ideologies determine a media outlet's content (Murthy, 2008b). Thus, the benefit of freeing media content from government regulation is not passed on to audiences, and content remains perpetually trapped in the hands of media managers, political ideologues, and spin doctors.

This is a direct consequence of the neoliberalism—meaning the liberalization of economy—that India adopted post-1990s (Schiller, 1996, p. 6). Murthy (2008b, 2010b) showed how the takeover of media ownership by politicians (for example, YSR political party head Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy's media houses in Andhra Pradesh: *Saakshi* News Paper and Television, *Indira* Television; TRS party founder and owner K. Chandrasekhara Rao's *Namaste Telangana* News Daily, *T.News* television channel),ideologues (Chandan Mitra, a journalist and BJP ideologue owner of the respected English-language daily *Pioneer*; T. Venktrama Reddy of the Indian National Congress and owner of *Deccan Chronicle* Group of publications),and film industry investors reduced the significance of the public sphere and objectivity in mainstream television. It directly impacts the content of those channels and, consequently, affects the working conditions and ethics of their journalists.

For instance, journalists at the *Saakshi* television channel[2] must report from an angle of criticizing or blaming the TDP, its archrival that runs the government in Andhra Pradesh. *Saakshi* not only indulges in unethical methods of reporting but also disseminates factually incorrect or fake news about TDP and its leader. Meanwhile, the channel and its newspaper do not broadcast or publish news critical of channel founder Y. Jagan Mohan Reddy. Though other channels and print media report negatively about aspects such as his suspected involvement in money laundering and shell companies, *Saakshi's* audience and readers do

not read or hear such stories. This style of reporting and method of pursuing journalism has become the guiding spirit for other channels like Telangana News Channel[3] (*T.News*).

The TRS party, which crusaded for more than a decade for the separation of Telangana from the state of Andhra Pradesh, founded a channel called *T.News*. Presently, the TRS runs the first-ever government in the newly established state and does not allow its channel to report oppositional news. That means court judgments against the TRS government, the opposition's criticism of its policies, and reports of corruption among party leaders and ministers are absent from *T. News* and its sister newspaper, *Namaste Telangana*. "Bias the content" is the main instruction to their reporters, anchors, and editors, who cannot report objectively. Ninan and Chattarji (2013, p. xvi) observed that "media bias, ethics, and practices are not merely professional matters for journalists. Nor do they relate only to seemingly abstract concepts such as democracy and the public sphere." Media bias is evident in virtually every sphere of its coverage—be it terrorism, caste atrocities, or perpetuation of social inequality.

Democracy and Expansion of Media

It is fashionable for some Indian journalists and academics to portray the media as a reflection of Indian democracy and to assert that the more media expands its formats and platforms, the greater the opportunities for democratic participation and enlightenment (Datta-Ray, 2000; Ninan, 2007). However, such shortsighted statements mask recent drastic reversals in every sphere of life in the country's democracy, including media. Because of media overexpansion with an eye on corporatizing and monopolizing content, the representation of caste, region, politics, and religion has regressed. Inclusive reporting and equitable development for all groups and categories of people is no longer a major goal.

The impetus for liberating Telangana from the media's "controversial role" provides a glaring example of the media thriving on "crisis, anarchy, and hate speeches." Bhattacharjea (2000, p. 71) writes on the media's declining performance: "By the end of the twentieth century, the respect the press had gained for its contribution to social change, the freedom movement and democratic awareness was being whittled away." This raises a fundamental question: How can the expansion of media following corporatization promote or strengthen democracy? Merrill (2000) addressed this paradox in his article "Democracy and the Press: The Reality and the Myth" that discussed the threadbare relationship between expanding media and its relation to strengthening democracy. Citing instances involving expansion of media and its impact on democracy across Asia, he concluded that there is no direct relationship between democracy and media expansion, whether a free press or an authoritarian one (p. 212).

Identity and Caste Politics

Caste politics-entwined reporting has turned 360°. It began in 1932 with Mahatma Gandhi's paper called *Harijan*, a weekly journal dedicated to reporting and writing about the problems of economically and politically weaker segments of society. Its primary aim was to help impoverished and underprivileged communities overcome stigmatizing and inhumane "untouchability." For a long time after independence there was no caste-based media writing in India. However, caste-based political parties that demanded a share in governance began to dominate elections in a big way in the late 1980s. This included the genesis of BSP and its first-ever electoral success in Uttara Pradesh.

According to Ninan (2003), caste-based journalism began to occupy center stage once Lalloo Prasad Yadav became chief minister of the state of Bihar. With the advent of reservations for OBCs under the Mandal Commission Report, caste-based journalistic writing reached its peak, embracing all castes and major and minor religious minorities without exception. It became a large phenomenon in states like Uttara Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka, where members of OBCs, including Muslim minorities, constitute more than half the population.

Consequently, caste-based journalism has assumed myriads of ugly forms. They range from reporting false stories, raising false casteist alarms, and ignoring caste-related corruption to misrepresenting personal and family feuds as casteist and disseminating reports that are biased against the underprivileged. For instance, Vij (2004) highlighted the polarization of coverage based on caste lines by one media house. Punwani (2006) criticized the English-language press—the *Times of India* and *Indian Express*—for not reporting atrocities by local political leaders against women from lower castes. And controversial caste-based stories against Bihari leaders and lower-caste representatives have been described as a casteist conspiracy of upper-caste media against lower-caste Bihari leaders (Ninan, 2003). Unfortunately, such dubious stories did not seem to matter to society at large.

As more educated youth from underprivileged classes entered journalism, they began to use sources from caste groups. Unfortunately, they often did not check such information for credibility and frequently end up with caste bias. Thus, a pattern of reworking journalistic ethics set in, and the media turned to using caste clichés in commentary and stories. In addition, caste associations multiplied, offering political, ideological, and economic support to media outlets that were filled with managers or other employees from their caste group, often leading to additional bias.

In contrast, Murthy (2008b) offered a different version of caste bias in a case study of the daily newspaper *Andhra Jyothi*. A subgroup of Scheduled Castes, which faced discrimination such as untouchability, advocated for

an affirmative action policy of quotas for certain castes in government jobs and academics. When a newspaper editorial attacked the way this subgroup was carrying out its advocacy campaign in 2008, members of that subcaste (*Madiga*) attacked its office, burned its papers, and damaged its furniture. The editors who wrote the editorial were illegally arrested. This response reflected an extreme form of reverse discrimination against the upper caste by a group claiming to be victims of discrimination.

Religion and Identity Politics

The most contentious role of the media stems from its portrayal of India's secular fabric. In fact, secularism has been inherent in Indian culture since times immemorial. Media aligning themselves with either Hindu or Islamic identities is not new (Murthy, 2007). For example, some media advocated against partition and the pro-partition Muslim League even before independence. At that time, the religious and patriotic jargon applied to secular media outlets was quite different from today: rightwing, moderate, leftwing, patriotic, or divisive. But after independence, media owned by the Congress Party, Socialists/Communists, and Hindutva forces (who consider all religions equal and argue against appeasement of Muslim and Christian minorities) began to project different views on the need to conserve secularism. While the Congress Party and Socialists/Communists branded the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as religiously fundamentalist, the BJP dubbed the Congress and Socialists/Communists as anarchists who threatened the country's integrity by appeasing religious minorities. Soon, private media owners also tended to align with a political or religious identity. Media that portrayed anti-Islam views were described as communal media, while those supporting pro-Islam views were labeled "secular." Thus, the very term "secular" became dubious, and questions abound as to which media, if any, are truly "secular."

Murthy (2007) analyzed articles published in two reputable English-language dailies, *The Indian Express* and *The Hindu*, immediately after the controversial demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque in Uttar Pradesh in 1992. The analysis yielded irrefutable evidence of BJP-versus-non-BJP media coverage bias. The analysis showed media split across several lines of arguments that portrayed the BJP as a champion of "Hindutva secularism" as opposed to "Western secularism" by other non-BJP parties (pp. 148–149).

Conclusion

Both before and after independence, the Indian media has performed divergent roles. While some carried out an adversarial role, others took a constructivist approach. There were both Western and indigenous media

ownerships in the pre-and postindependence eras. Further, some media owners were motivated primarily by profit in the decades immediately following independence. Events like the 1975 declaration of a national emergency and implementation of the 1990 Mandal Commission Report drastically altered the mediascape. Casteism and caste equations also changed the political landscape, and consequently the mediascape, in states like Bihar and Uttara Pradesh.

Liberalization of the media economy led to the new forms of alignment and expansion among owners. This resulted in the formation of new monopolies, leading to monopoly capitalism in which journalists must rework the ethics and values of their profession. Meanwhile, clichés of casteism, regionalism, and religionism became the focus of stories that these journalists churn out.

Scholars and journalists have long contended that the expansion of media at the grassroots level, accompanied by more pluralist views, would strengthen democracy. Instead, it has complicated the media's role *vis-á-vis* objectivity. Overall, unfortunately, media plurality—although an indicator of strong democracy—does not automatically strengthen either democracy or media ethics that should produce objective reporting.

Notes

1 The state of Andhra Pradesh has an interesting genesis, merger, growth, and bifurcation that no other federal state has. Carved out of then-composite Madras State in 1953, the states of Andhra and Hyderabad merged in 1956 to create the combined state of Andhra Pradesh with Hyderabad as its capital. After the merger came a perception that people from Andhra had taken job opportunities from the Telangana people and divested its water resources to benefit Andhra areas. This led to separatist agitations that culminated in the formation of the state of Telangana in 2013.
2 *Saakshi* television channel: Established by Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, son of the late Chief Minister Y. S. Rajaskhar Reddy. Jagan Mohan Reddy established his own party, the Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSR) The channel is the mouthpiece of Jagan Mohan Reddy, who is now the opposition leader in the state legislature. His wife, Y. S. Bharati, is its managing director. Reddy runs another television channel called *Indira* Television.
3 *T.News*—Telangana News was established by the Telangana Rashstra Samithi (TRS), founded by its leader, K. Chandrasekhara Rao in 2011. The channel acts as the party's official media wing and is known for one-sided reporting.

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